

Media Literacy – What is it, and why do our students need to be educated in it?



The advent of new media has made us, as educators reassess what and how we are teaching our students. **They are exposed to many different forms of media**, espousing many different messages. Our students need to be able to not only **decode** these messages, but to **analyse and criticize** them. An article, “Literacy for the Information Age” by Dr Renee Hobbs, an associate professor of communication, details some of the benefits we can give our students, by teaching media literacy.

For students today, media is not only the **major leisure activity**, it is the **dominant source of information** about the world. Educators have been negligent in giving students the skills to understand and harness these tools that surround them.

As educators, we may need to **widen our definition of what literacy** is. As our idea of what language is has had to change over the last few years, so to must our overall view of literacy. Historically, language in education has meant the spoken - oral language, reading, and the written word. Today's students use a language that includes **music, images, sounds and electronic communication**. Literacy is about **accessing, evaluating and communicating messages**. We must include all these new forms of media related messaging in our view of literacy, so to teach our students how to use it successfully. They are exposed to so much information, it is up to us to teach them how to analyse and criticize it?

Analysing messages is about teaching **comprehension skills** – categorising, determining genre, making inferences on cause and effect, looking at specific strategies used by the author, and at their point of view. By expanding what we consider “text”, to include images, music, electronic media, we build skills in the students

that are **relevant to the world they live in.**

Teaching media literacy can become part of a wider change in the content and delivery of education. Hobbs notes some reform already taking place in schools.

- “inquiry based education
- student centered learning
- problem solving in cooperative teams
- alternatives to standardized testing
- integrated curriculum”(Hobbs, 1998 p. 2).

By embracing the new media we can find a powerful way of motivating students about how, and what they learn.

“When educators permit and encourage the study of contemporary media products in classrooms, students develop skills which alter and reshape their relationship to media products” (Hobbs. 1998 p. 9).

Key Concepts

Media literacy incorporates traditional aspects of teaching; comprehension, literary criticism, communication. No matter how the message is conveyed, print, image, television programme, we are still able to analyse and critique the message. Key concepts for students are:

- Messages are representations of social reality.
- Individuals negotiate meaning by interacting with messages.
- Messages have economic, political, social and aesthetic purposes.
- Each form of communication has unique characteristics.

(Hobbs, 1998)

While as educators we might not like the idea that mass media is so prevalent in our students lives, it is the reality

of the society we live in. By making use of so familiar a form of communication, we have the ability to make learning more authentic and relevant to our students. Most New Zealand schools are already moving towards Inquiry based learning, including co-operative techniques, problem solving and integrated curriculum. Media literacy skills are becoming increasingly necessary if we want to make our curriculum meaningful and authentic.



What is Meaningful Learning?

Meaningful learning is a phrase developed to describe students who are "willfully engaged in a meaningful task" (Jonassen ,Howland, Marra, Crismond, 2008, p.2).

For this to happen successfully, there are several characteristics that must be followed.

Active - When students are actively engaged through observations, manipulations and interactions learning is more interesting and meaningful. Students learn constantly through their interactions with peers, and their environment, and by making learning tasks active, we can engage them more.

Constructive - As well as being active participants in their learning, the student also needs to discuss and reflect on what they have observed. It is in the talking about, wondering about, asking about, that learning takes place.

Intentional - Students achieve more when they are aware of the goal they are achieving. When they understand what it is they are learning, and why, and how they can achieve it, the task becomes much more meaningful.

Authentic- By placing learning tasks in real world situations, it immediately becomes of more interest, and more real to the students. Using problem solving situations engages students, and allows them to transfer the skills they have learnt to other situations.

Co-operative- By acknowledging the fact that students will always learn from each other (guitar riffs, sports skills) we can harness their enjoyment of collaboration and co-operation. By teaching students how to collaborate, disagree, listen to other points of view, we teach life skills as well as making the learning tasks more interesting and meaningful.

(Jonassen, Howland, Marra & Crismond, 2008)

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How does this relate to this wiki?

This topic will allow a teacher to really experiment with the fundamentals of Meaningful learning as described by Jonassen et al. (2008). We are asking students to be **CONSTRUCTIVE** by discussing and reflecting on real life food issues they deal with every day. They will be expected to be **ACTIVE** by producing real results, as in produce they have grown, advertisements, songs, and interviews. The activities planned for are **INTENTIONAL** as the students will know from the outset what they are trying to achieve, and what they will have to do to get

there. We will be asking them to work in groups, on activities that will require high levels of co- operation to achieve success. By choosing to study a topic such as the branding of food to children (this wiki's topic), we give students the opportunity to work on issues they are familiar with, and encounter in their daily lives. The students will have the opportunity to really analyse and critique the media information they are exposed to, in a way they may not have experienced before. This unit of work will encourage them to think about the messages and images they are bombarded with daily. One of the aims of the unit is to make the students discerning consumers. Firstly they will investigate what surrounds them, then they will be able to use the media technology available to create their own messages and analyse their findings. They will be investigating AUTHENTIC environments, such as their own supermarket and their own pantries. They will have the chance to work in CO- OPERATIVE situations and learn with and from each other. Media literacy skills are increasingly relevant to our students as they engage in a society that is

bombarding them with messages and information. They need to be able to recognise the reason for the message, who it is aimed at, and whether it is accurate in order to make wise and informed decisions for themselves.

Note: For further reading, We recommend a highly informative and readable article

Hobbs, R. (1998) "*Literacy for the Information Age*" published in James Flood, Diane Lapp and Shirley Brice Heath (Eds), *Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy Through the Communicative and Visual Arts*.

International Reading Association (pp. 7-14). New York: Macmillan

Jonassen, D., Howland, J., Marra, R., & Crismond, D. (2008). What is meaningful learning? In *Meaningful learning with technology* (pp.1-12). Upper Saddle River, NJ:Merrill-Prentice Hall.